

Book Review - Peacemaking in South Africa A Life in Conflict Resolution by Jaap Durand

Peacemaking in South Africa A Life in Conflict Resolution
Van der Merwe, H.W. 2000
Cape Town: Tafelberg, 223 pp.

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This is the autobiography of a man who played a significant role in the peace-making process in South Africa that led to the negotiated settlement in 1994, which is often described as the South African "miracle". H.W. van der Merwe, now deceased after a long illness, had been described by the media as the man "who brings South Africa's enemies together".

Although he tells his own story, his autobiography is also the story of how the South African "miracle" began to take shape in the early stages that preceded the political negotiations of the 1990s. By and large it all started in 1984 when H.W. (called "Harvey" by many English-speaking people according to the Afrikaans pronunciation of his initials) facilitated the first meetings between the African National Congress (ANC) in exile and supporters of the apartheid regime. Chapter 11, which relates these events, makes fascinating reading. The slow process of convincing government officers and supporters about the necessity of at least meeting with members of the ANC clearly comes to the fore.

The frankness with which the author tells his story enhances the complete credibility of a history that unfolds on a very personal level without losing sight of the far broader picture on a national and even international level. He does not hide the fact that at his first meeting with the Executive Committee of the ANC in Lusaka he was embarrassed because of his lack of knowledge of the ANC, so much so that he had to ask Thabo Mbeki (Head of the Department of Information and Publicity) and Alfred Nzo (Secretary General) their respective positions in the organisation. He also acknowledges his contact with the security police. Despite the fact that he did not have an easy relationship with them and that they watched him closely, he nevertheless shared with them his reports on his meetings with the ANC, emphasising the sincerity of the ANC's wish to talk. By doing this he clearly showed his peace-making and bridge-building intentions. Typical of their perspective, the security police warned him that he was playing with fire and that he was being used by the ANC for their own purposes. The difficulty of playing such a role is vividly portrayed in an incident which happened at an earlier stage in his life as a lecturer at Rhodes University, when his wish to protect someone banned under the Suppression of Communism Act on the one hand and his friendly relationship with the head of the security police in Grahamstown on the other hand led to a serious misunderstanding about the role he was playing (pp. 38-40).

In the early chapters he tells us a very abbreviated story of his early life, including a rather naive but honest story of the moment in his life when he as an Afrikaner "became an African". Then follows the story of his "Anglicisation", when he started lecturing at Rhodes University and later at the University of Cape Town, where eventually he became director of the Centre for Intergroup Studies and honorary professor of the University (1968-1992).

To a large extent the middle part of his book (chapters 4 to 8) does not only relate his personal history, but also the history of the Centre for Intergroup Studies. This is not surprising, because the Centre almost became synonymous with H.W. van der Merwe. In these chapters we read about the Grabouw Seminar in 1972 on the theme "The Political Position of the Coloured People in South Africa", a unique occasion "where coloured and white Afrikaner leaders shared living quarters for a weekend a highly emotional and controversial event at the time because it raised the spectre of racial intermixture" (p. 62). The 1973 student strike at the University of the Western Cape, the fight against forced removals at Cross Roads and District Six, the Soweto revolt and the subsequent Cillié Commission of Inquiry all these stories of important milestones in the struggle against apartheid during the 1970s are told from the perspective of someone who had been deeply involved in efforts to salvage something out of a chaotic situation. Historians will discover in this book details of certain happenings which they will not find anywhere else. In this regard special mention must be made of the Centre's and H.W.'s relationship with the black conscious South African Student Organisation (SASO) and its founding president, Steve Biko (pp. 68-73).

In chapter 3 the author gives us some insight in his own spiritual and religious development. He grew up in the Dutch Reformed Church as an active member, but gradually became completely disillusioned by this church's unwillingness to change from its racist policies and attitudes and its emphasis on dogmas and creeds. In 1973 he and his wife, Marietjie, approached the (coloured) Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for membership, recognising their approach as a political statement. Unfortunately the conservative minister of the nearby DRMC congregation was not very helpful for fear of rocking the boat. The result was that H.W. and his family eventually ended up with the Quakers. Quakerism became their spiritual home.

When one compares H.W.'s personal history with that of Quakerism the appropriateness of this new religious relationship becomes very clear. The Religious Society of Friends with its basic orientation towards peace and justice has shown throughout history how a small band of men and women can witness to the world out of all proportion to its numbers. In the hidden world of behind-the-scenes peacebroking H.W. demonstrated the same tenacity of purpose.

However, H.W.'s relationship with Quakerism did not preclude difference of opinion with regard to the political situation in South Africa during the 1980s, more specifically the issue of an economic boycott. This he describes in chapter 14. Whereas the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) supported the "total isolation" (including economic isolation) of South Africa, H.W. was of the firm conviction that campaigners in foreign countries did not have the right to cause unemployment among workers in South Africa. He also differed from the AFSC in so far as it refused to have any contact with the apartheid government. H.W. argued that it was the task of Quakers to help them break out of an evil system. The following quotation is an apt summary of the consistent course followed by the author in his peacemaking efforts: "If Quakers could work with liberation forces who had resorted to a violent armed revolt, of which we could not approve but could understand, we should also be able to work with people of goodwill who operated within the apartheid system which we deplored" (p. 185).

H.W. van der Merwe ends his autobiography on a rather controversial note when he criticises the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for failing "to meet the needs of millions of South Africans who wish to see that justice is done". For the author it is a basic principle of justice that wrong should be righted that the offender deserves punishment. Furthermore, the Truth Commission failed through the collapse

of its Commission of Reparation through poor leadership and inefficiency. Nothing came of the expectations of black people that they deserved to be compensated for the immense material losses as well as the emotional and psychological damage that they suffered (pp. 212-216).

In his foreword Nelson Mandela comments: "It is because South Africa had people like H.W. van der Merwe that we were able to enjoy a dramatic and peaceful transition to democracy, which serves as an inspiration to the world."

Anybody who reads H.W.'s book with an open mind, will agree.

Notes

References